

Geopolitics or Partnership? Central Asia Policy after the Russian-Georgian War

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Geopolitics or Partnership?

Central Asia Policy after the Russian-Georgian War

The new American government under Barack Obama has the opportunity to avoid geopolitical confrontations in Central Asia and seek a path leading to the constructive integration of Russia and other states in the Caspian region into the Afghan peace mission. The EU has long spoken out in favor of broad cooperation on the part of all actors in the region. But what strategy is Russia pursuing? The war between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008 and Moscow's unilateral recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have sent shock waves throughout Central Asia. For the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia has waged a war against a CIS state, altering existing borders by force. To this day, no government in Central Asia has shown any willingness to obey Russia's demands and recognize the two renegade Georgian provinces as sovereign states. For the EU the question is whether it should cooperate closely with Russia in Central Asia or continue to develop its own strategy in the region. The DGAP Russia-Eurasia Centre discussed the Central Asia strategies of Russia and the EU at an expert breakfast with Aleksei Malashenko from the Moscow Carnegie Center, Johannes Regenbrecht, Head of the German Foreign Ministry's Division for the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, and with other German experts.

Russia and Central Asia after the Georgia war

At first glance, the situation appears clear-cut: Russia wanted to utilize the Georgia war as an opportunity to expand its influence in Central Asia. Moscow is seeking to strengthen its military presence in the region and to curtail the influence of other actors in Central Asia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Central Asian states have more or less accepted Russia's hegemonic claims, largely because they lack alternatives. So far, the USA and particularly the EU have lacked both the means and the desire to bring their security policy and economic interests to bear in Central Asia. However, the Russian leadership underestimated the degree to which the Central Asian states regard Russia's role

in the region as having changed. Before the Georgia war, Russia was the most important intermediary in regional conflicts. Since Russia's unilateral recognition of the two Georgian provinces, the Central Asian states no longer accept Russia as a referee. The fear that Russia could use border conflicts in the region for its own interests and exert pressure on the countries there has aroused concern among Central Asian elites.

In recent years, Russia has enjoyed some success in realizing closer security policy ties with the Central Asian states through new multilateral structures. Alongside the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation (SOC), Russia is mainly attempting to exert influence in the region through the Collective Security Treaty Organiza-

tion (CSTO). Although Russia and China are attempting to work together within the SOC to balance their influence in Central Asia, Moscow plays a dominant role within the CSTO. In early 2009 the members of the CSTO (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) agreed to establish a rapid response force to deal with crisis situations. Their goal is to respond jointly to security risks such as international terrorism, cross-border criminality and the drug trade. In the process, the participating states regard Afghanistan, which shares a border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as the primary security challenge.

The 'Great Game' in Central Asia

For Aleksei Malashenko, the CSTO is primarily an instrument designed to keep the Central Asian states under control. Thus Russian companies provide weapons to these states at low domestic Russian prices, which means that Moscow is indirectly subsidizing these countries. At the same time, the military organization serves to stabilize the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. Malashenko assumes that Russia has a certain interest in maintaining a relative presence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In this way, it can justify its military bases in Central Asia and the expansion of the CSTO. This then enhances Russia's significance in the region for all Central Asian states, since the impression is maintained that the true danger is coming from the south. Since the end of last year, Russia has been buying natural gas from the Central Asian countries at world market prices. Gazprom then transports the purchased gas as 'Russian' gas through its own transit pipelines to the West. Moscow wants to prevent the Central Asian states from selling their gas to the West without going through Russia, since in this case Russia's pipeline monopoly would be threatened and the states in the region would become more independent. Moscow wishes to keep all energy exports from the territory of the former Soviet Union under its control.

In the international arena, Central Asia is primarily regarded as being at the mercy of geopolitical interests. At issue here are both security issues and the pro-

duction and transport of raw materials. The current conflict over the closing of Manas Air Force Base in Kyrgyzstan reveals the means by which funds and influence are being fought over in Central Asia: the one who pays the most makes the deal. In this case, Moscow paid more than the Americans. Thus the Kyrgyzstan president Kurmanbek Bakiyev called on the USA to close the base. While the Central Asian leaders enjoy certain advantages in this 'Great Game', there is a lack of outside pressure which is needed to implement important political and economic reforms. The authoritarian regimes are being courted and thus are stabilized. Russia's objective is to weaken American influence in the region and to permanently secure its own role as a regional power. By contrast, the Central Asian states are interested in maintaining good relations with both Russia and the EU and US. They are not interested in having a single dominant actor in the region.

China

However, the West and Russia must anticipate an increase in Chinese influence across Central Asia over the coming years. Beijing is pursuing the long-term goal of becoming the most important actor in the region. Unlike Russia, which is primarily basing its strategy on the development of military cooperation with the Central Asian states, China is concentrating on economic cooperation. For China, Central Asia's raw materials are of supreme interest. The only threat to Chinese policy in the region derives from Islam, which Beijing is seeking to combat with all the means at its disposal.

EU and OSCE

For Germany and the EU, Russia is the key actor in Central Asia since Moscow has a monopoly on energy transports from Central Asia to Europe. The EU is interested in a dialogue between Russia and Central Asia and will promote joint large-scale projects in the future. From the EU's perspective, the central challenges for the region are combating terrorism and the drug trade

as well as the development of more secure supply structures for natural resources such as water. Uzbekistan, for example, does not provide any gas to Tajikistan because Dushanbe does not supply Uzbekistan with the water resources it needs. In dealing with these issues, the OSCE plays an important role in the region alongside the EU. While many Western states have criticized the assumption of the OSCE chairmanship by Kazakhstan in 2010, this could nevertheless raise international awareness of Central Asia and promote cooperation among the Central Asian States. Although Kazakhstan is still a long way away from the standards of Western democracy, it is regarded as a stabilizing force in the entire region since, in comparison to the other Central Asian states, it has been relatively successful in adjusting to market-based structures in recent years.

The Central Asia strategy that Germany's EU Council Presidency launched in the first half of 2007 has intensified Europe's relations to the region. While the economic exchange has grown with the countries in the region, so far there have been few concrete improvements in direct cooperation. Because of the undemocratic political structures and the traditionally high level of corruption, only a few European firms are prepared to invest in the Central Asian states – aside from Kazakhstan. The trade volume between the EU and Kazakhstan in the past year amounted to 400 million Euros. The exchange of goods is significantly lower with all the other Central Asian states.

A lack of 'good governance'

One problem that the autocratic leaders in Central Asia have experienced has been a lack of success in improving living standards. At the same time, the previous leaders had no interest in developing democratic and civil society structures which in turn could give rise to new political elites. The inability to carry out internal reforms is leading to a situation where – with the exception of Kazakhstan – the younger generation is abandoning these countries. It will be important for Russia to influence the renewal of elites in Central

Asia over the coming years. The future political elite could be supplied by three sources: the autocratic power apparatus, modernizers from the economic elite as well as traditionalists who are affected by moderate Islam. Russia's problem is that it has not been concerning itself with its own Russian lobby in these countries. No influential Central Asian politician is prepared to represent Russian interests. One side effect of this "de-russification" is that in only a few years English may replace Russia as the lingua franca in Central Asia.

Job migration is an important issue in relations between Russia and the Central Asian states. Central Asian seasonal workers provide a major contribution to the economies of their home countries. This is why there are fears that Russia could use these migrants as pawns in its negotiations with the Central Asian states. If, for example, Russia were to send the six million Uzbeks currently working in Russia back home, Tashkent would have an enormous problem that could spiral out of its control. This problem could become virulent if the negative impact of the financial crisis on Russia intensifies.

Energy cooperation

Particularly since the gas dispute around New Year's 2008/09, the EU has displayed growing interest in closer cooperation with the Central Asian states in the field of energy. However, the states of the region are sending largely negative signals: the Kazakh leadership has no interest in the Trans-Caspian Pipeline and the Turkmen president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow has likewise made negative statements about Nabucco. One reason for this skeptical attitude is that for many years the EU states have failed to show their clear backing for this project: the EU must now make it clear that it really will construct the Nabucco pipeline and that it has a direct interest in doing business with the Central Asian states. This would also encourage the other Central Asian states to support this project. The Ukrainian-Russian gas dispute has increased the EU's willingness to build Nabucco. However, the problem remains that Nabucco can only operate profitably

if additional supply sources can be developed, particularly in Iran. In addition, all the neighboring states must clarify the legal status of the Caspian Sea before pipelines can be laid across the seabed.

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